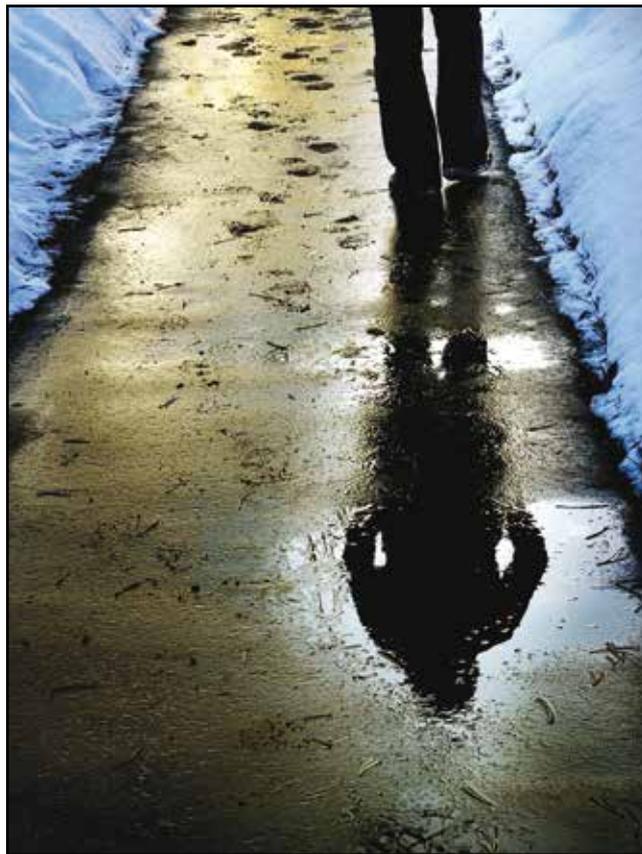


# Mental Illness in the Church

*by Todd Guggenmos*



**T**hey are all around us. They may live in our neighbourhood, or they may live in our homes. They are members of our churches; they are our Christian brothers and sisters. They might be our children, our parents, grandparents, or spouses. They are of all colours and races. They are those whom we can see outwardly that something is affecting them, and those whom we would never know. Who are they? They are those who suffer with mental illness.

Few would fit the caricature of the “mental patient” that we might have in our minds. No strait jackets, no outbursts, or deficiency. Whether or not their illness is outwardly manifested, and regardless of severity, they are children of God, known by Him. They are just like you and me, except they experience great difficulties when it comes to their mental wellness.

This is a serious issue for the Church. Those with mental wellness issues are all around us. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) reports that “20 % of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime.” If this holds true in our Synod, that could mean up to 12,000 members of Lutheran Church–Canada have or will battle a mental wellness issue in their lifetime. The CMHA also reports that “it is estimated that 10-20 % of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder—the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.”

I am not an expert in this field. I have no medical training. What I have is practical experience from

supporting a child who battled serious mental illness, from supporting those who battle mental illness in my parish and beyond, and from suffering from grief induced anxiety and panic attacks myself.

Despite awareness efforts and events like “Let’s Talk Day”, a stigma around mental illness still exists. Mental illness is still the infirmity that people will get mad at you for having. It is still the illness that people will tell those suffering from it to just “suck it up”—or the kinder but no more helpful “pray it away.”

Mental illness is an umbrella term which includes many different aspects. It covers those issues that we most likely think of when we think of mental illness: schizophrenia, for example, and bi-polar disorder. But it also includes such issues as post-partum depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. One aspect they have in common is the stigma that surrounds them. Unlike ailments that are strictly physical, there is still the idea that those who battle physiological ailments need to hide this fact, or that they should be embarrassed.

This stigma also exists in the Church. As a gathered group of sinning saints, we are not immune to perpetuating the stigma of mental illness. This might include casting a judgemental look at someone who needs to leave the sanctuary in the middle of the Divine Service, assuming that someone who can’t be in crowds and so cannot attend any church activities has done so for selfish reasons, or by trying to diminish someone’s

symptoms by saying things such as “Well, we all feel down sometimes.”

We are—as Luther wrote in his explanation of the eighth commandment—to “defend, speak well of, and explain everything in the kindest way.” That command extends to our relationships with neighbours with mental health issues.

Working to eliminate the stigma that exists around mental health begins with the acknowledgement that these are serious health issues, not behavioral issues. No one chooses to suffer with mental health issues, and no one should be blamed for experiencing them. People experiencing mental health issues are not “acting,” and have not chosen to have the symptoms they experience.

Too often we treat people with “invisible” illnesses differently than those with easily recognizable physical ailments. We would not think of telling someone with cancer or diabetes, for example, to just “suck it up and get over it” or to just “trust God more.” Our God does perform miracles, and sometimes specific miracles to specific people by curing them of their ailments, but we cannot then make the judgment that those who do not receive a miracle have been cursed or forgotten by God. We should never trivialize or diminish another person’s illness, whether physical or psychological. The crucial first step in reducing the stigma of mental illness in our churches is to recognize that mental illness and physiological issues are illnesses, and not the result of personalities or choices.

As Lutheran Christians we have so much to offer to those experiencing mental health issues. The proper distinction and application of God’s Law and Jesus’ saving Gospel is crucial when dealing with and ministering to those with any illness. That’s especially true when it comes to mental illness. Imagine you are at a loss to explain or understand why you are suddenly thinking differently than before, and feel trapped in thoughts that are not normal to you. Then someone tells you that you need to do more, maybe serve God better, just sin less, and then, maybe then, things will get better for you. Imagine you can barely do anything—getting out of bed

is a struggle—and when you need a message of hope the most, a well-meaning brother or sister in Christ just tells you what you must do, what God demands of you.

As Lutherans, we love the Law of God as it is His Word. But we also know that the Gospel is what brings hope, gives peace beyond understanding, and changes lives. We can free those suffering with mental illness from labouring under the weight of the law by speaking the Good News of Christ’s saving work for them. Knowing that Christ is for them, has washed them clean in the saving waters of their baptisms, and comes to them in His Holy Supper, they are free to trust that He is with them also in whatever they might go through in this broken world. Some may battle illness all their lives, but they can know and trust that God is there in that suffering. They can know that, while it may not always seem like it, mental illness has been defeated through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Reducing the stigma and loving our neighbour who is suffering of course involves more than just not doing negative things. There are practical ways to help and care. We can pray for those who we know are suffering. If we know someone is suffering, ask if you can pray for them, and then do it. And not just in your private prayers, but ask—if the context is right—if you can pray with them immediately.

Ask yourself what help you would want if you were battling a mental illness, and then offer to come alongside someone

with compassionate care and genuine concern.

Remember their family and friends. On top of the weight that having a loved one suffering any illness can put on family and friends, mental illness can have the extra dimension of affecting personality and behaviour. Come alongside them and ask what you can do for them.

Remember, those in our churches battling mental illness are fellow redeemed saints, who may need a little extra compassion, a genuine prayer, and a loving helping hand.

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